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SUBJECT: CHILE'S O'HIGGINS REGION: ABUNDANT IN COPPER,
CONSERVATIVE POLITICS

¶1. SUMMARY: (SBU) On January 14, the Ambassador visited Chile's 6th region to meet local leaders and strengthen ties with an important economic and cultural area. The 6th region, also called the O'Higgins Region after Chilean liberator Bernard O'Higgins, is located approximately 90 km south of Santiago. It is a major agricultural producer and contains the world's largest underground copper mine, El Teniente. In meetings with a congressman, the governor, and a local mayor, the Ambassador emphasized U.S. engagement with Chile in areas such as education, energy, and trade. The congressman and mayor, both members of the conservative Independent Democratic Union party (UDI), said the Alianza is well positioned to succeed in the region and the country. Each official expressed interest in promoting further exchange and the visit generated positive coverage from local and regional press. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Rancagua Mayor Eduardo Soto, who represents the 6th region's capital and largest city, warmly welcomed the Ambassador and noted this was the first visit by any Ambassador since his inauguration in December 2008. A member of the UDI party, he stated the Alianza is well positioned to succeed in upcoming national elections. He said public opinion in the 6th region is consistent with national polls that favor the center-right candidate Sebastian Pinera. While acknowledging that "nothing is guaranteed," he seemed optimistic about the Alianza's future in the 6th region and the country. Separately, Congressman Eugenio Bauer, also an UDI member, echoed the mayor's thoughts. He added the campaign intensity will likely increase beginning in March.

¶3. (SBU) Governor Hernan Huenchullan, appointed by President Bachelet in 2007, emphasized the economic vitality of the 6th region, which has more than 30 vineyards and the world's largest underground copper mine. The primary challenges include improving education, government services, and tourist infrastructure. The Ambassador noted the significant increase in bilateral trade since the inception of the U.S.-Chile Free Trade Agreement and emphasized the benefits of free trade to the 6th region. He explained USG efforts to expand educational opportunities through the Chile-California partnership, highlighted the visit to Chile by Apple representatives, and underlined the availability of university course materials through the internet.

¶4. (SBU) Accompanied by Congressman Eugenio Bauer and EPOLOff, the Ambassador also visited Sewell - a company town founded by the American mining firm Braden Copper in 1904 to develop El Teniente, the world's largest underground copper mine. Once home to more than 10,000 residents, including many American citizens, the town is now a UNESCO world heritage site and is being restored to capture its unique place in Chilean history. Sitting atop copper reserves estimated to last another 90 years, Sewell serves as a link to the 6th region's past, present, and future. While workers used to live in the town and work in the mine, employees

today commute from the regional capital, Rancagua. In the future, local officials hope those workers will be joined by tourists visiting Sewell. The Ambassador's visit underscored the historic relationship and the bright future between the U.S. and the 6th region.

SIMONS